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The following papers were delivered on the occasion of the inauguration of James N. Gettemy as President of the Hartford Seminary Foundation, and of Robert S. Paul, William L. Bradley, and Ford Lewis Battles as Professors in the Hartford Theological Seminary.

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# The Single Community of the Church

PRESIDENT JAMES N. GETTEMY





*President GETTEMY*

In an appraisal of the role of a Seminary, the primary fact that we need to recognize is this: congregations and seminaries constitute a single community. Some find their lot cast chiefly in a local congregation, some principally in a seminary, but all are gathered by Christ into a single community of which He is the Head. Wherever persons witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, there is the Christian community. Sometimes this witness is by obedience and we pray: "Establish Thou the work

of our hands upon us, yea, the work of our hands establish Thou it." More often this witness to our Lord is by repentance when we must pray: "We have done those things which we ought not to have done." By obedience or repentance, whenever and wherever we testify to Christ's Lordship, there is Christian community. It exists when in sincerity we unite in corporate worship. It exists quite as much when a solitary Christian engages in an agonizing struggle to make a critical personal or vocational decision. It exists when we participate in a discussion on faith and life. It exists quite as much when one Christian ponders the mystery of death of a beloved. To repeat: Christian community exists whenever we acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ over heart and mind and will, whether by obedience or repentance, whether in visible fellowship or alone. So all of us belong to one community whether in congregation or seminary. These are not two separate communities but one: one in vocation — called of God in Christ to testify to His Lordship.

Now this may seem commonplace, but if we reflect a moment we will realize that it is not commonplace at all. The Christian community has tended to make a rather sharp division between Christians who are in congregations and Christians who are in seminaries. Between the two there has been a great gulf fixed, not



intentionally but actually nonetheless. The consciousness on the part of ourselves as Christians that we are one community, that local congregations and seminaries are part of one whole, this consciousness has been a very frail consciousness, if indeed it has existed at all. Therefore, to say congregations and seminaries are part of the one community which is the body of Christ is not to say something commonplace but to affirm that which is basic. Congregations and seminaries are not two communities; they are one. Together those of us who are gathered in congregations and seminaries testify to Him who is Lord of our life.

This is not to say there is no difference between the two. The most obvious difference is that the seminary is composed primarily of those who are making or intend to make their Christian witness within the Church. The congregation on the other hand is composed primarily of those whose Christian witness is essentially beyond the Church. What do they contribute to each other as parts of the one community?

What does the congregation contribute to the seminary? Is not the temptation of the seminary to succumb to what one might call academitis, that is to the fallacy that truth is propositional. Now Christian truth can be set forth propositionally and must be set forth in doctrines, in dogmas, in creed. Yet essentially Christian truth is Christ the truth and this is intensely personal truth. It is truth in a Person for persons. We grasp it or, more accurately, are grasped by Him, only in a personal relationship. Jesus Christ is not simply an objective fact about whom we speak; He is Truth who speaks to us and to Whom we make response. Christ the Truth has always addressed men personally and the response has always been a personal response. It was so of him who might be called the first Christian, the dying thief on the cross. It assuredly was true of Paul en route to Damascus. It continues to be true everytime anyone makes a response both of penitence and thanksgiving when he discovers in Christ crucified the magnitude of his own sin and the miracle of Divine Grace.

Whether it is true for those of us who are involved in the life of a seminary depends in part upon our awareness that we are one with all men in our need of Jesus Christ. Participation in the life of a local congregation keeps us mindful of this; helps to deliver us from an impoverished, propositional presentation of Christian truth; and constrains us to make our teaching a personal witness to Him Who said: "I am Truth."

But what is the contribution of the seminary to the congregation? Is not the temptation of those whose life is beyond the seminary to forget the rock whence they were hewn? Are not local congregations often so overcome by the pattern of life about them that they cease altogether to witness to Jesus Christ? Surely this fact needs little elaboration. Contemporary American congregations can be a beehive of activity, none of which has anything to do with the life which is hid with God in Christ. Indeed, a round of trivial activities can become an effective insulation against Him Who called the Church into being. The seminary makes its contribution to the congregation by being the seed bed from which men, firmly rooted in the Christian faith, go forth with singleness of purpose: to be sown in the life of a congregation that it may witness obediently and effectively to Jesus Christ. Seminaries and congregations so woven together strengthen each other to fulfill the vocation of the one community, a community called of God to bear personal witness to Christ the Truth.

## II

Having affirmed that we are a single, witnessing community, we need to remember that our primary witness is to those outside the community. The Church exists for those beyond its walls. Does it really? Simply to say this startles us. Does the Church exist for those beyond its walls? As we think of the congregations to which we belong, are the energies of these congregations being directly channeled to people outside the congregation? Honesty compels us to answer, 'No.' We find ourselves in local congregations behaving in a way which we would regard as folly were we to observe such behaviour elsewhere. Imagine a hospital, if you will, the members of whose staff were devoted to attending exclusively to each other. Yet this is not an overdrawn picture of what repeatedly prevails in local congregations: they are mutual societies operated for the benefit of their own members. It is not just the mission compound where a high wall has shut off the Church from the world outside; it is true of the American congregation also. Think of the committee meetings which are held to decide about painting the church steeple or the quality of paper to order for the primary department, in contrast to time spent considering how to minister effectively to those outside the Church who lead lives of quiet desperation.



We must hear this inarticulate cry of men to whom we are called to witness. We must hear what the world is saying to the Churches. We must become a listening community. Israel has been referred to as "the exposed nerve of humanity." This must be true of the New Israel. It must know and feel the deepest human passions and tragedies in every age. In our time it must listen attentively to what the 'beat generation,' the 'silent generation,' the generation of 'organization man' in America is saying to the Church.

Especially the witnessing community must not be deaf to the undertone of the current religious awakening in the United States, accompanied by a return to the Church. We well may be cynical about the motives prompting this return to the Church, a cynicism rooted in an awareness of the mixed motives of our own hearts. But an ultimate cynicism is unbecoming to a community which quotes so frequently and approvingly Augustine's dictum: "Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee." May not the return to the Church represent, to some extent, the yearning of men for a new reality in contrast to the distorted realities by which we all are living? Might this not be true even though those returning may be unaware of such motivation and unable, even if aware, to articulate it? If we must be cynical, we ought to direct this cynicism not against those who are returning, but against ourselves. As churchmen, are we offering stones instead of bread, some irrelevant maxims instead of the full grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? Is the Church to which men now turn simply a duplication of other good organizations in the community, unable to satisfy restless hearts, or is it the veritable Body of Christ in which all our broken lives are healed and made holy? The listening community will become the witnessing community, for what we hear will make plain the insufficiency of our wisdom and the deep, deep need to ". . . preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."

We must listen and witness to those outside the Church in America. We also must listen to those within the Church, beyond America, through whom we witness. For the younger churches overseas, by their very existence, speak to us of the fact that Jesus Christ is not to be identified either with Western civilization or the American way. Both the latter are repudiated by many of the world's destitute, terrified peoples, yet they confess Jesus Christ is Lord. In truth He is speaking to us through these younger churches not to identify Christianity with the prosperity of our land nor to limit



our witness to its shores. Again the listening community will become the witnessing community, for what we hear will make plain that our Lord validates His promise: ". . . I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."

To this axiom that the Church exists for those beyond its walls, there are at least two implicit corollaries. First of all, witness to the Lordship of Christ over all of life must be made where people are: home, club, classroom, office, factory, legislature, labor union. Secondly, witnessing in such places is primarily the responsibility of the laity. Together these corollaries make explicit an important aspect of the meaning of the Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers, a principle which a contemporary clergyman has said: "never quite came off."

Is it too hopeful to suggest that today the principle is beginning to be evidenced? Surely one cannot deny the heightened Christian concern of laymen everywhere. In America there is a groundswell apparent in the response of laymen to meetings called to consider the relation of Christian faith to vocation, and in the innumerable instances, known to pastors, where laymen have sought to make business, social and civic decisions in the light of their Christian commitment. The signs of renewal throughout Europe are almost all evidences of a lay awakening, such as the German academies. The younger churches often have a lay ministry, and a lay ministry only, caring for all the work of the Church there. One does not want to claim more achievement for the laity today than the facts warrant, but they do seem to warrant the hope that the priesthood of all believers is a growing reality and not a principle only.

To the extent that this is true, we are approaching the Biblical significance of the word which is translated "laity." To us at best it means "not clergy" and at worst "not competent," as when we say of ourselves with reference to some work of which we have no knowledge, "I am a layman in that field." Perhaps the two meanings are fused even in ecclesiastical usage! There is not a hint of this in the Biblical term itself. It has nothing to do with distinguishing between clergy and laity, between professionals and 'also-ran.' It certainly has nothing to do with incompetence — quite the contrary. It is a term describing those who have been enabled to witness to God because He has made them a whole people. Today's lay awakening points to a recovery of this Biblical understanding of a whole people of God engaged in a ministry.

In such a time, those of us who are ordained ministers must heed the warning of the Evanston Assembly of The World Council of Churches not to impede the ministry of the laity to the world. By this it was meant primarily that clergymen ought not to make inordinate demands upon the time and ability of laymen for the organizational life of a congregation. But there is another, less obvious way to impede the laity's unique witness. It is to fail as clergymen to encourage and support laymen in their critical, difficult ministry beyond the Church. It is to fail to be instruments of Divine Grace through the administration of Word and Sacrament. It is to fail to be clergymen!

### III

Clergymen and seminaries do have a unique role. Earlier we said that the Seminary graduate is sown in the life of a congregation that it may witness obediently and effectively to Jesus Christ. This means as ministers we must break open our common life and hold it up to God's holiness in Christ until all repent. This means as ministers we must take broken lives and hold them up to God's mercy in Christ until all are healed. By what name shall this office be called? The term "pastoral director" has been suggested recently. Assuredly its proponent understands the essence of the ordained minister's work is to impart the life of God to men through Jesus Christ. The word "pastoral" presumably preserves this essential character of the office. But I fear the noun may modify its adjective, the director swallow up the pastor! I much prefer the traditional nomenclature: preacher, teacher, pastor, priest. Assuredly what the ministering community does not need from its seminaries is more competent "directors," bigger business managers.

As you know, recently clergymen have gone through a state of self-analysis. We have been busily taking our pulse these last half dozen years until, if we do not stop taking it, we shall be completely hypochondriac. But in the pulse-taking, the statisticians have come up with the information that ministerial duties increasingly have to do with business management, administrative detail; that this is what clergymen are doing. This may be so; it does not mean that it is what we ought to be doing. It does not mean that "pastoral director" is a more adequate image of the Christian minister than preacher, teacher, pastor, priest. The conference table and the committee room are a very poor substitute for the Word and the

Sacrament. We need to ask "Who is converting whom?" Is the Church making the world over into the image of the body of Christ or is the world making the church over into its own busy, feverish, empty image of which already, as recent books indicate, it is growing weary.

Therefore, seminaries are not called upon to become schools of business administration, for ministers are still being called to be ministers of Jesus Christ. The purpose of the seminary must remain what traditionally it has been: a community of faith and learning in which those who participate come to understand more fully what the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit has done, is doing and will do, and how better to share this good news with men everywhere. It is the "how better to share this good news with men everywhere" which has led us at Hartford to have a school of religious education, a school of missions, an institute of church social service. The ministering community must know the most effective way whereby the Lordship of Jesus Christ can be persuasively shared with all men. The ministering community must be as familiar as possible with the world in which it is to speak by word and deed. Indeed, as we have said, it must be a listening community — listening patiently, sympathetically, penitently, gratefully to what the world is saying to the churches.

Through such schools as exist here and elsewhere — religious education, missions, social service — we have the resource for instructing men for the ministry how best to communicate the Christian faith. But it is the faith itself, of which the School of Theology is the interpreter, that is the heart of the matter and that unites us on this campus. We focus on Biblical, theological and historical studies for these are the primary media through which God in Christ addresses us. We witness to Him whatever form our ministry may take and wherever it may be. All are preachers and teachers and interpreters. All are missionaries, whether in America or overseas. All are ministers of Jesus Christ: ". . . there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one." The heart of the seminary community is now, as always, the Gospel of God, the good news of God in Jesus Christ. We are gathered together into this community that we might the more surely be laid hold on by Him Who is the Truth, and that we might better learn how to share this good news with all men everywhere.

As a community of Christian faith and learning, then, our singular purpose is not to do some new thing, but to do as best we can what a century and a quarter ago the founders of Hartford avowed as its purpose: "the raising up of sound and faithful men." To the degree that we achieve this purpose we fulfill our role within the body of Christ. For in the words of Henry Sloan Coffin, concluding his address here in 1927 when the present campus was dedicated, "If the students of this institution go out to interpret to the world of our time the mind of Jesus Christ; go out to interpret it skillfully, honestly, lovingly and seem to fail, their failure will be of greater service to mankind than other men's successes."



Church History and Ecumenical  
Problems In Theology

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PROFESSOR PAUL

The message of the Bible and the history of the Church are variations on a single theme. To the Bible's declamation that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself", the history of the Church adds the ascription of praise. "Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen." (Eph. iii.20).

But is the task of the Church historian to make *explicit* the ascription of praise that faith discerns, or is it simply to describe faithfully the events and facts of the Church's history? Is it possible to write objective history — or must the Church historian inevitably impose a Christian pattern on the history he describes?

This question is more acute for the Protestant historian because his own discipline inevitably faces him with the challenge of ecumenicity and involves him in it the more deeply he is prepared to investigate the historical origins of his own Confession.

There are many tasks in which the Ecumenical Movement needs the help of the church historian and many points at which historical research will challenge the ecumenical presuppositions, for the Churches will never really get to grips with their studies of 'Institutionalism' of 'Tradition and the Traditions' or of the 'non-theological factors' in church relationships until they are prepared to get down to historical cases historically considered. The historian may find himself questioning the premises of ecumenism that is too abstract or

sentimental; even as ecumenism forces him to question the easy assumptions by which confessional theology has often expected him to provide simple illustrations for the theologians in their exposition of Providence, the Holy Spirit and the Church.

But the Ecumenical Movement also challenges the church historian — and on a very wide front, for an ecumenical approach to history involves not only the relationships between Protestant and Catholic or the understanding of Eastern Orthodoxy by the western churches, but also the correctives of Asian, African or South American insights on the history of our own western churches. In particular the historian must realize that before he can make his own most effective contribution to solving the ecumenical problems in theology, he must clarify the relationship of his discipline to secular history on the one hand, and to the rest of the theological disciplines on the other.

## I

### THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH AND WORLD HISTORY

1. The existence of the Church in the world raises the problem of the meaning of world history and the powers behind it. It spells out the questions, "what is the meaning of the history that is being made around us, and what is the relationship of this world history to the history of the People of God?" While a sect is a small proscribed or persecuted minority living in the geographical isolation of a wilderness or the social and political isolation of foreign exile, neither the problem of world history nor of Christian social ethics will arise. It is only when the sect begins to take responsibility *for* society that the questions how a Christian should act in that world, and what the history of that world means, are raised. The comparison of 16th century Separatism and 17th century Puritanism can be particularly instructive at this point: there is a good deal to be said for the thesis that the Separatists began to be ecumenical only when they entered the English Civil War, or tried to govern the mixed society of early American Colonies.

Let us be clear. It is not the Ecumenical Movement itself which has posed these questions, but the world into which the movement has come into existence. The modern revolutionary period poses the issues in a particularly sharp form, and they were put in an especially



pointed way during the period of the 1930s and 40s when a western civilization (which had until then assumed its Christian roots) was confronted with Fascism and Communism, two revolutionary systems with clearly defined doctrines of history. The philosophers and theologians were the first to see the relevance<sup>1</sup> and it was only later that the historian, working by the slower methods of his own discipline began to recognize that here were problems to which he must attempt some answer<sup>2</sup> — indeed, in which (because they went to the roots of his subject) his own contribution was essential. So the questions were posed by history itself, but in their relationship to the Church they were articulated by the Ecumenical Movement — particularly by the dilemma that to be true to the Gospel interpretation of “world” and “history” the Church *must* point to herself, but in shame she *cannot*.

Each of the writers who contributed to the volume *The Kingdom of God and History* in the series of preparatory studies to the 1937 Oxford Conference on ‘Church, Community and State’ emphasized the centrality of the Church’s place in world history. (That was, perhaps, the more remarkable when one realizes that this volume appeared in a world which was challenging more and more the claim of the Christian revelation to be the hub of its life.) Nevertheless, although all the writers reasserted the Church’s central position, the Church’s actual fragmentation was present as an unconscious embarrassment, and it was only the Roman Catholic, Christopher Dawson, who upon his own understanding of the Church’s unity, could confidently and unambiguously point to the history of the Church as a proof of his argument.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Helmut Thielicke: *Geschichte und Existenz*, Paul Tillich: *The Interpretation of History*, Nicholas Berdaeyev: *The Meaning of History*, Reinhold Niebuhr: *Faith and History*, J. de Senarclens: *Le Mystère de l'Histoire*. The subject was also treated in the Bossey Conference in 1949 on “The Meaning of History”. *Papers of the Ecumenical Institute*, No. V.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Toynbee: *The Study of History*; Herbert Butterfield: *Christianity and History*; K. S. Latourette: *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Kingdom of God and History* (Vol. III of the Oxford Conference volumes on “Church, Community and State” Chicago & New York, 1938). “Nevertheless the Catholic interpretation of history is organically related to the Catholic conception of the nature and office of the Church, and in so far as Protestantism formed a new conception of the Church, it ultimately involved a new interpretation of history . . . For if Christianity is the religion of the Incarnation, and if the Christian interpretation of history depends on the continuation and extension of the Incarnation in the life of the Church, Catholicism differs from other forms of Christianity in representing this incarnational principle in a fuller, more concrete, and more organic sense. As the Christian faith in Christ is faith in a real historical person, not an abstract ideal, so the Catholic faith in the Church is faith in a real historic society, not an invisible communion of saints or a spiritual union of Christians who are divided into a number of religious groups and sects. And the historic society is not merely the custodian of the sacred Scriptures and a teacher of Christian morality. It is the bearer of a living tradition which unites the present and the past, the living and the dead, in one great

2. But is the problem of interpretation any different in essentials for the Church historian than it is for the general historian? All history is concerned with life, and both because it *is* so concerned with human life, and also because it has to make so much use of the human factor in its enquiry, the truth it discovers will always be modest and relative. To interpret his material the historian needs not only scientific knowledge and reasoning ability, but also human insight and humility. The dilemma of all historians is how to use honestly and scientifically the human insight which, although it is an indispensable gift for their work, is *per se* non-scientific, (in the sense that it cannot be assessed).

Lord Macaulay wrote:

"To write history respectably — that is, to abbreviate dispatches, and make extracts from speeches, to intersperse in due proportion epithets of praise and abhorrence, to draw up antithetical characters of great men, setting forth how many contradictory virtues and vices they united, and abounding with *withs* and *withouts*; all this is very easy. But to be a really great historian is perhaps the rarest of intellectual distinctions. Many scientific works are, in their kind, absolutely perfect . . . But we are acquainted with no history which approaches to our notion of what a history ought to be — with no history which does not widely depart, either on the right hand or on the left, from the exact line.

The cause may be easily assigned. The province of literature is a debatable land. It lies on the confines of two distinct territories . . . A perfect historian must possess an imagination sufficiently powerful to make his narrative affecting and picturesque. Yet he must control it so absolutely as to content himself with the materials he finds and to refrain from supplying deficiencies by addition of his own. He must be a profound and ingenious reasoner. Yet he must possess sufficient self-command to abstain from casting his facts in the mould of his hypothesis."<sup>4</sup>

So thought Lord Macaulay, and there are historians of the Church who might very well ponder the modesty, the measured scepticism with which he viewed the historian's work: the aim of history and

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spiritual community which transcends all the limited communities of race and nation and state . . . The conflict between the Two Cities is as old as humanity and must endure to the end of time. And though the Church may meet with ages of prosperity, and her enemies may fail, and the powers of the world may submit to her sway, these things are no criterion of success. She wins not by majorities but by martyrs and the cross is her victory." (*Ibid.* p. 210, 214 and 216.)

<sup>4</sup> Review on *The Romance of History*.

its dynamic will always be the desire to get nearer to the truth, without ever having the right or the temerity to claim that it has ever fully succeeded.

Are, then, the limitations of Church historians any different from those of other historians? The issue came out during the conference on "The Meaning of History" in 1949 in a discussion which centred in the problem whether there could be any such thing as a distinctively 'Christian' interpretation of history or any such person as a 'Christian Historian'. It was pointed out that if the presuppositions of Christian faith were allowed to influence or determine the results of historical research and reflection, the end result might be a good Christian but a bad historian. On the other hand, others argued that a Christian cannot be "either simply an individual who lives and works by the same standards as his fellow-workers, or *primarily* an efficient member of his profession. His Christian faith includes a special understanding of God, man, life and the world."<sup>5</sup>

(a) The issue here will be seen first in the nature of that 'human insight', for if history demands an understanding of life, the divine Revelation which gives *ultimate* meaning to life can never be irrelevant to it. A historian who accepts the Christian faith, and is trying to live his own life in that faith, should have something in terms of love, sympathy and insight which equips him with a deeper understanding of his subject. But that is something which is not to be flaunted as a special sort of Christian *charisma*: it must be proved only in the quality of the work done. The Dominical rule applies here, as it applies elsewhere, "by their fruits ye shall know them", and if the gift does not reveal itself in the work, the historian may have to look for the defect both in the quality of his discipleship and in the accuracy of his research.

(b) In the second place, many church historians would claim that their norm of historical judgment must inevitably differ from that of other historians because of their subject matter — they are dealing with the Church, which is the gift of God in the Gospel. Obviously, this is the place where the ecumenical challenge "What is the Church?" becomes relevant, but we must be content at this point to note that there are these paradoxes in the Church Historian's work, and that a difference of approach between his aims and methods and those of his colleague who is studying other institutions may be

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<sup>5</sup> *On the Meaning of History* p. 10f.

claimed from the God-given nature of that which he studies, even although it is a claim which he must understand that secular history cannot concede. He will be unwise, and perhaps in the last analysis, unchristian, to make too much of the claim.

### 3. So to summarize:

i. The Church Historian recognizes the unique and God-given nature of the institution which is the subject of his study. If the revelation of God in Christ constitutes the centre of all history, then Church history should reveal that redeeming Incarnation in all ages up to the continuous present — it should make real and actual the fact that *kairos* is here and now, present in the reconciling witness of the Church. Church history, which begins in and is a commentary upon the Advent of Jesus Christ, is the centre of world history to anyone who accepts the Christian faith. "The realization of the Kingdom of God within history", writes Paul Tillich, "is determined by the history of the Church, in part directly through the historical growth of the Church itself, and partly indirectly through the conscious or unconscious relation of all history to the history of the Church".<sup>6</sup> This is the centre of this historical globe.

ii. The church historian must recognize, however, with equal force, that as an institution, composed of sinning human individuals, the Church can be examined historically and sociologically in the same way as any human institution: the mixed nature of the Church must never be brushed aside. We must recognize that the events of world history, the conditions of men living at certain times and moulded by a certain geography have all had their effect upon the history of the Church, upon its doctrine about itself, and upon its theology. How far, for example, were Augustine's ideas of the *Civitas Dei* drawn from the pattern of the crumbling empire within which he was writing? How far did his own conception of the City of God help to define the earthly ambitions and pattern of the empire of Charlemagne? There is an interplay in all history between the history of the Church and the history of society.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Kingdom of God and History*, p. 121.



## II

### CHURCH HISTORY AND THEOLOGY

This interplay becomes more pointed as we examine the relation of Church History to Theology.

1. If the history of the Church is in any sense a continuation of the Incarnation, it must be a real incarnation and a *redemptive* incarnation — real in the sense that the Spirit becomes incarnate in *mortal, fallible, flesh*; redemptive in the sense that in this 'Body' Christ becomes 'sin' that He may redeem us. No doctrine of incarnational impeccability should hide from us the power of evil in our churchly institutions. And that is something which the confessional historians are extremely reluctant to recognize, but it is a point at which this age calls the church historian to correct some of the more impious claims of the theologian.

I ask you to reflect upon the way in which we all assume that the continued existence of 'our' confession today is an example of God's mercy and His over-ruling providence in our favour: this is the evidence that the Lord's People are 'as an apple of an eye', and that 'the Lord's arm is not shortened,' etc. It is a comforting doctrine, but it is legitimate only if it is placed within its proper historical context. Some confessions might very well ask themselves how far their continued existence today is due to God's providence, and how far it is due to the ruthless cruelty with which, in association with the State, they persecuted all other confessions out of their territories. There is a story about the Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, addressing a great Baptist Assembly in London. He declared amid tumultuous Baptist applause, "We Baptists are the only confession that has never persecuted!" And when the cheers had died down he quietly added the comment, "We never had the chance!"

The story has a certain appositeness when one considers what happened to the Anabaptists of the 16th century. It is an interesting historical speculation to ask how much of the continent of Europe today would have been Baptist if that movement had not been persecuted so ruthlessly by both Roman Catholics and Protestants; and I imagine that when Southern Baptists measure the present-day rate of Baptist expansion by the rate at which the Anabaptists were exterminated in the 16th century, they must feel that their principles have as good a claim to Providence as any.

The question I suggest we have to raise in our confessional history writing is how far the existence of a confession in the world today can be regarded as the approval of Providence upon its witness, and how far, on the other hand, its continuance in the world is due to an alliance *with* the world, and often due to diabolic cruelty towards other branches of the Church, our brothers in Christ. To be initiated deeper into this mystery of iniquity we may have to go humbly and penitently to the so-called secular historian, or to the non-christian historian of India, China or Russia, in order to see ourselves as others see us.

2. This raises the question of the relationship of 'the Truth' to historical interpretation in two different ways.

(a) If — as some historians hold — there are standards of judgment which the church historian can derive only from theology itself, then it would seem as if in his interpretative work, his task may not be very different from that of the systematic theologian or biblical exegete. On the other hand it must be clear that while there is an important identity of purpose in all these disciplines, there is also an important difference of method; for although they are *all* commentaries on the work of the Living Christ, it is equally evident that whereas the systematic theologian and the biblical scholar have a certain given 'text' before them in the historic symbols of the Christian faith or in the actual text of Scripture, one of the principle problems of their colleague in the historical field is first to establish his 'text' — i.e. the historical facts — before he can begin to expound its meaning.<sup>7</sup>

I stress this point, not to pre-judge the relationship between church history and theology, but to illustrate the relative nature of the historian's exposition, even of 'the Truth'. What he accepts as facts, what he ignores among the facts will be as much a part of his interpretation as his later treatment of and commentary upon the evidence; he can suppress, he can select, he can under-emphasize or over-emphasize, he can forget, and at the end he can fail in his interpretation for no other reason but that he has been ignorant of one simple historical fact which is the clue to the whole period. There is a relativity in all historical judgments that are part of the historian's conditions of work, and this is no less true for church history

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<sup>7</sup> I would not wish to imply by this that critical problems do not exist for systematic theology or Biblical studies. Far from it! But at any rate those who work in these disciplines know the limits of their material to an extent which is impossible to the historian.

and 'Christian' historians than it is for world history and 'secular' historians. The church historian will be very careful if he is a good historian *not* to draw out too dogmatically a 'message' from the facts he records, for the general meaning of the history of the Church cannot stand clear until the great book of History itself has been unrolled before us. Historical studies in respect of the Church — and the church traditions those studies help to reveal — will always be more tentative in their exposition of God's redemptive act than exegetical studies.

On the other hand the church historian is at one with his other theological colleagues in insisting that there *is* a meaning not only to the history that he expounds, but to all history, and maintains that this meaning is to be found in the Christian revelation: but it is a secret 'text' for although the exposition of God's redemptive act *does* exist in history, it exists in hidden facts, which we are challenged to discover, without ever having the certainty that we have completely succeeded.

(b) The second way in which this same problem is raised is at the point where Church History interlocks with Christian Doctrine, and where we are forced to ask whether there can be such a thing as a *theological* interpretation of the history of the Church, and if so, to what extent.

The great nineteenth-century historian, Philip Schaff, (whom either by reason of title or tenure, both Dr. Battles and I can claim as our distinguished predecessor,) only began to write his great history of the Church when he reached America. I do not know whether one can build very much on the fact that he had left the comparatively unified ecclesiastical scene of his native Switzerland and settled in a country where there were already almost all the known sects of Christendom, (together with not a few which spoke with an unmistakable American accent,) but the fact remains that he very soon had to face the relation of the Churches to their doctrine. The *Geschichte der Apostolischen Kirche* inevitably led to the study of *The Creeds of Christendom*.

Simply because the Christian faith is founded upon a historical revelation, church history cannot help touching every part of theology — it will have a good deal to say about the way in which the historical record of that revelation should be approached, and so from the contact with the Biblical studies the historian will have to interest himself in the inter-relationship between the Church and

society in the development of Church doctrine, liturgy and ethics. I am not saying that these subjects must be left entirely to historians or that the historical approach is the only one, but I do suggest that the historical link between them is vital to a proper understanding of them.

But to what extent can there be a theological understanding of the Church? Professor Ronald Osborn in a paper to the American Society of Church History pointed out that within the trend of modern theology the primary interest in Church history often appears to be not what happened, but the *meaning* of what happened. He also pointed out that if this tendency continued, (in subjecting the primary examination of sources in Church history to the theological 'correctness' of our interpretation,) there might very soon develop a serious wedge between the way in which church history is studied in theological seminaries and in state universities, to such an extent that conversation between the two kinds of historian became almost impossible.<sup>8</sup>

The warning is timely, for the problem becomes very much more acute when the 'myth' is no longer simply a picture used to describe a particular sociological or historical aspect of the Church, but when it becomes itself built into the doctrine of a denomination. The immensity of the ecumenical problem is revealed when we realize that every 'doctrine of the Church' is such a 'myth', around which histories of the Church are constantly being written. The more one believes in the sacredness of the Church as God's gift and not as man's invention, the more necessary becomes the ecumenical challenge to face the possibility that the Church of the Gospel may not be the Church of one's confession. Which Church is the Church? Is any Church, of itself, 'the Church'? Granted that the Church of Jesus Christ is an integral part of the Gospel and therefore cannot itself be understood as relative in the same way that purely human institutions are relative, the Ecumenical Movement makes us face the possibility that our "orthodox" confessional presuppositions or our "liberal" confessional presuppositions may all be wrong.

And yet our dilemma is in the fact that a clear doctrine of the Church is the inevitable and necessary theological equipment that a Church historian takes with him as he goes to his research; a man who writes about the history of the Church cannot help having a

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<sup>8</sup> "Church History in an Ecumenical Era."



doctrine of the Church, either acknowledged or implicit. This paradox remains unresolved.

(c) Theology, however, does not only affect our understanding of church history at the point of the doctrine of the Church. Reflect upon the differences of interpretation that result from an explanation of the history of the Church either in terms of the Incarnation, or in terms of Atonement. The former will tend to produce an emphasis upon the perfection and impeccability of the Church in history, and the latter will tend to disregard the perfection of the Church as the Body of Christ in an emphasis upon its self-giving and mission of reconciliation.

If we are going to find a theological meaning for Church history, it is possible that we shall find the valid image ultimately only at the place where doctrine finds its centre for us, or in terms of the Christian faith in its wholeness. Over against the danger pointed out by Professor Osborn, (which is too real to be ignored,) one must mention the opposite danger, which is equally real — namely, that in the illusory belief that he can shut out all influences but “the facts”, the church historian finally withdraws into a shell of descriptive phenomenology, and ignores what is being said by the theologian. The end result of that would be that eventually there would cease to be any communication between the theological disciplines.

3. If this danger is to be avoided it means that the Church historian and the systematic theologian must listen to each other. For the theologian it means not merely readiness to re-examine the historic confessions, but a readiness to re-examine those same confessions *within their historical context*.

Some time ago Karl Barth is reputed to have said that Church history is a peripheral subject in theological studies,<sup>9</sup> and there can be no doubt that there were those who found in this sufficient cause for disregarding the two thousand years of the Church's witness and a reason for jumping directly from exegesis to systematic theology. This does far less than justice to Barth's view of the history of the Church. “Church history”, he said, “must be understood primarily as the history of the government of the Church by the Word of God, the history of the exposition of Scripture accomplished

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<sup>9</sup> I have not managed to trace this statement, although there can be no doubt about its influence.

by Scripture, i.e. by Jesus Christ Himself in the Church.”<sup>10</sup> If we are to understand in what sense Church history is on the circumference and exegesis at the centre, it is not because the circumference can be discarded or ignored, but it is for the best of all historical reasons, namely, that the Christian faith itself is founded on a *historical* revelation, in events which happened at a particular time and place; and this is made known to us in a *historical* record. We give pride of place to the exposition of those records not because Biblical criticism or speculation are more fundamental disciplines than historical research, but because the *event* of Jesus Christ is ‘prior’ to the event of the Church, or for that matter, Scripture itself.

This is important because one senses in some parts of the world that amid the thunders of exegesis and systematic theology the Church historian is listened to rather as a Swiss colonel might be listened to at a conference on nuclear weapons — he provides a colourful interlude, but he is not engaged in the real business!

This could lead to the historian’s withdrawal more and more into research that has little contact with the rest of theology. Karl Barth said that church history can never be expounded in the abstract, but “only along with a simultaneous investigation of Scripture and attention to its self-exposition”.<sup>11</sup> The implication of this is that the Church historian cannot properly deal with his own subject unless he listens to the Word of God speaking through the other theological disciplines — he cannot ignore the historical background of Scripture, he cannot disregard the effects of Christian doctrine upon Church structure or upon society, he cannot neglect the effects of social, political and economic factors upon the formulation of doctrine or upon the forms of the Church, he cannot fail to listen to the historic and the contemporary exposition of the Word making itself heard in exegesis, homiletics and in liturgy. Although he cannot be a master in all theological fields, he must have interest in all, for the Word of God comes to us as the incarnate Truth, and Christ judges our Church institutions, doctrines and liturgies *in history*.

4. For this reason, perhaps one of the most important ecumenical tasks of the Church historian within each confession is that which I might describe with more bluntness than finesse as keeping the

<sup>10</sup> *Gotteserkenntnis und Gottesdienst nach reformatorischer Lehre* (Gifford Lectures 1937-38) E. T. by J. L. Haire and Ian Henderson, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1938) p. 181 f.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

systematic theologian in his place! One can speak of the Word of God in Jesus Christ as a historical event, and even make the historicity of that event the central place of one's theology, but it only becomes *real* as history when it is seen as an event in the continuum of time and space in which we live here and now.

The element of discontinuity which is revealed in the radical break with ecclesiastical institutions on the part of the prophets, and supremely in the Person of Jesus Christ, must not hide from us the fact that this discontinuity is relevant only against the background and within the context of the *continuity* of God's purpose in time; and if the history of the Church is relegated to the hinterland of theological studies, that fact will be disregarded. The end will be that despite our intention to put the historical event of Jesus Christ at the centre of theology, that event itself will become simply an 'idea' to be juggled with theologially, which is totally unrelated to real time: even the denial of philosophical religion could itself become a philosophy of ideas if it is not grounded in a history that is part of our experience. Perhaps one of the most important functions of Church history today is to sound the warning that theology for all its talk about 'historic event', is becoming increasingly disinterested in history except as *an idea* and therefore increasingly divorced from the event *as a fact* — 'What happened?' is too often regarded as irrelevant.

The practical ecumenical task of the Church historian in this is to prevent — as far as possible — the theologian from elaborating a confessional doctrine of Church, Ministry and Sacraments which bears no relation to the Confession's actual history. Many of the theological principles formulated by our forefathers owe quite as much to historical circumstances as they do to Biblical insight, and I do not know who is going to remind the theologian of that unpalatable fact unless it is the church historian. So often in ecumenical discussions the Confessions argue the theological principles as if they came down directly from heaven without ever having been muddled by the mixed motives and human compromises of history.

Let me bring this down to some pointed ecumenical examples:

1. The fact that from the year roughly A.D. 90 to the year A.D. 1520 the government of the Church by bishops was unquestioned, is a fact of history that should not be so lightly brushed aside as it is by non-episcopal theologians. Nor should they so easily ignore the forms, in which the Church, through practically 1500 years,

sought to express its faith in life and liturgy: you cannot disregard the ecclesiastical form and the practical expression of piety through these years unless you are prepared to say that God allowed the Gospel to be hidden and abused for almost a millenium and a half.

2. On the other hand, we have to ask, if episcopacy is basic to re-union, why are so few Episcopal Churches in communion with each other? If this is a uniting principle, why is it that Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglicans have found it so difficult to unite in history? Also, those who maintain that Episcopacy is of the *esse* of the Church might very well reflect on the fact that the Anglican Church held communion with non-episcopal Churches in the 16th and 17th Centuries (even as the Swedish Lutherans do today) and still they did not dissolve into heresy as a result!

3. Those who hold lightly to creeds and sacramental forms too easily disregard the content of the faith and the sacramental life that has sustained the Church through her long history. At what point does this become apostasy?

4. But those who put all their trust in the written confession and in the Sacraments should read the history of Christian social service of the Society of Friends and the Salvation Army, and should measure their own church by that. Or they should reflect upon the fact that in Britain the strictly orthodox Church responsible for formulating the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in the 17th Century became within 100 years entirely Unitarian in doctrine.<sup>12</sup>

These are examples (in which I hope you will not detect too much confessional bias) of the way in which the Church historian may prevent the theologian from spinning his fairy webs out of nothing, and keep him a little closer to the ecumenical reality that begins with penitence. For this is in line with the Gospel of Jesus Christ who reminds our church institutions that equality with God is not a thing to be grasped at, but that perfection becomes incarnate only in humility and in the willingness to be counted as nothing.

In the final issue the discipline of Church history ecumenically conceived offers to all our theologies the charge offered by St. Paul to the Church at Rome:

"By the grace of God given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to

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<sup>12</sup> The Presbyterian churches in England had become almost completely Unitarian by the middle of the 18th Century.

think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him. For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." (Romans xii. 3-5). —





# Is a Philosophy of Religion Possible?

WILLIAM L. BRADLEY

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PROFESSOR BRADLEY

We live in a so-called secularist age — quite fortunately, I would say. No longer can religion hope to exercise authority over the minds of men with no credentials other than a book, an institution, or a type of experience which can simply claim to be self-authenticating.

Even in the case of neo-orthodoxy, appeal is made to the rationality of man. The modern tools of historical and literary criticism cannot be overlooked or brushed aside. This, in fact, constitutes one of the scan-

dals of neo-orthodoxy in the opinion of the fundamentalist, who falls into confusion when he finds the language of orthodoxy used in the manner of a liberal.

Religion must make its case in the courts of reason. While a philosophy of religion may be scorned, philosophical methods are unavoidable in our day. Religion must make its appeal to human reason if it is to have a hearing in our modern age. And today it is in the area of epistemology that religion, like metaphysics, receives the strongest challenge from philosophy.

Is a philosophy of religion possible? The very asking of this question would seem to imply that it is. How could one presume to occupy a chair in the philosophy of religion in a seminary if he did not believe that his subject has a respectable and essential place in the curriculum?

But while we may assume that a philosophy of religion makes a necessary contribution to the theological curriculum (and not simply because it has always been there), we cannot assume that the term means the same thing to everyone. There are some who think of it as an apologetic for theology, others who consider it to be a preparation, others who believe it to be "the heir of traditional theology", and still others who consider it to have an analytic value

only. This fourfold distinction is one that Zurdeeg draws in his recent study of the subject, and he maintains that it is only in the fourth sense — that is, as an analytic study of religion — that the discipline is relevant today.<sup>1</sup> He distinguishes between philosophy of religion and a separate discipline which he terms “discursive theology, a convictional discipline which, in the name of the church, enters into discussion with the world outside that church.”<sup>2</sup> In our day Tillich symbolizes the apologist, Thomism conceives philosophy in the preparatory sense, and Ducasse would perhaps best represent the view that philosophy supersedes theology.

I shall be following along somewhat the lines that Zurdeeg sets out, save that I shall step beyond the limits which he establishes for philosophy of religion. I shall be maintaining that while philosophy of religion cannot pass judgment on the validity of religious presuppositions, it has a great deal to say about their implications, and that any theology must be placed under the discipline of the philosopher insofar as he is talking about the historic fundamental human problems which stem from our efforts to probe the mysteries that stretch beyond the reach of puny human reason.

## II

Is a philosophy of religion in general possible? First, let us clear away some of the misconceptions that may lie in our path. We must say in the first place that there is no such thing as *the* philosophy of religion. Brightman has settled this question to the satisfaction of everyone.<sup>1</sup> He introduces his text with the simple declaration that he is presenting, not the philosophy, but rather, *a* philosophy of religion: namely, his own. More than this he cannot do. Of his book he writes, “I have a system of my own, but I am convinced that my views are not absolute truth . . . Only God, or someone who has confused himself with deity, could write *the* philosophy of religion.”<sup>1</sup> There is no single philosophical interpretation of religion which is final, but there are as many philosophies as there are philosophers who care to deal with the subject.

But can there be a philosophy of *religion*, by which I mean religion in general? I should doubt it, for I wonder whether there is anything such that we may truly term it religion in general. “Reli-

<sup>1</sup> Zurdeeg, W. F., *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, Nashville, 1958, pp. 300-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>1</sup> Brightman, E. S., *A Philosophy of Religion*, N. Y., 1940, p. vii.



gion" is an abstract term for something that is concrete and personal. Just as there is no faith in general, but only a faith which carries "the force of my existence," as Jaspers has put it,<sup>2</sup> so there can hardly be a religion more real than the religions which comprise it. It is not valid to assume that religions presuppose religion, or that religions in particular are synonymous with religion in general. While there can be a psychological pattern or set of patterns which will typify those who are religious, it is hardly true to assert that the thing which underlies these psychological states is necessarily religion in general. John Hick, following Oman and Farmer, asserts that faith — like all knowledge — carries with it psychological certainty, "for to the believer faith is not a probability but a certainty".<sup>1</sup> "Religious faith", he states, "is absolute and implicit belief"<sup>2</sup> by which I infer that he means it must be specific and concrete. There is no philosophical bracketing in faith: it is an either/or.

To talk about the philosophy of religion in general, therefore, is to talk about no religion in particular, and this is to talk about religiosity and not about concrete matters of faith. It is to mistake a corpse for a living thing; it is to deal with the most superficial levels of religious belief, and to reduce significant differences to insignificant similarities. I should say it is the differences between religious affirmations that are the most important statements we make, and not the similarities, for it is on the unique aspects of our faith that we stake our existence.<sup>3</sup> It was, for example, in obedience to the distinctiveness of their faith that the children of Israel were enabled to endure the worst and the best that the world could give them and to stand where others fell. And it is the distinctiveness of Christianity that clearly separates it from Vedantic syncretism and prevents the blending of these faiths into one. Or, to put it the other way around, it is the syncretistic distinctiveness of Vedanta that prevents it from accepting the exclusive claims of Christianity.

Those who maintain that there is such a thing as religion in the abstract will be inclined in their assertion to deny the validity of any particular religion and so to become philosophers without any religion except religion itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Jaspers, K., *Way to Wisdom*, New Haven, 1951, p. 45.

<sup>1</sup> Hick, J., *Faith and Knowledge*, Ithaca, 1958, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> In this connection see A. B. Gibson, *Proceedings of the XIth International Congress of Philosophy*, Vol XI, Amsterdam, 1953, p. 49.

At this point I should be inclined to say that one of the fundamental distinctions between philosophy and theology — one that has been pointed out by Emmet as well as Tillich<sup>1</sup> — is the difference between an approach that is objective, detached, and free of involvement (philosophy) and one that is inextricably, subjectively involved in the truth of its subject matter (theology). The God of the philosophers is a very different God from that of the theologians; for God is an object for philosophy, but He is Subject to the theologian. In a sense the philosopher must put the question to God, or put God to the question; but the theologian stands in awe of Him who has revealed Himself and has made known His will to His people. Such a God, the God of theology, is not a concept but a power. And He is worshipped not in general terms, but very concretely, at least to the extent that one dare not take Him lightly.

And in this case, a religion stands or falls as a whole. It is not like a solution from which various elements can be extracted, but it is a combination which has its own unique structure and qualities. To remove a part is to destroy the whole.

I believe that this is because each religious faith is founded upon a certain world-view: a set of absolute presuppositions, as Collingwood puts it,<sup>1</sup> which are beyond the possibility of question. Why does a man believe in God? This is a question which cannot be asked because it has no answer. He believes because he believes. You may show him that his idea of God is old-fashioned, barbarous, or naive, but you will not modify it: either you will fail to shake him or you will destroy that belief altogether.

Therefore, if we limit our study to religion in general, we shall never get to the heart of any religion; we shall be dealing merely with the superficial by-products of a religious faith.

We can even make a catalogue of credal beliefs of various faiths, and yet this will not touch the religion of those who hold to their faiths. For either they will reject the conclusions which we can demonstrate about the similarities of their beliefs, or they will abandon their faith entirely.

I maintain, therefore, that the philosophy of religion in general, if not an impossible study, is at least an irrelevant and superficial

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<sup>1</sup> Emmet, D. M., *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking*, London, 1949, pp. 146-56.  
Tillich, P., *Systematic Theology*, I, Chicago, 1951, pp. 8-11.

<sup>1</sup> Collingwood, R. G., *Metaphysics*, London, 1940, pp. 31-3.

one. In this, of course, I am in the company of many contemporary theologians who have learned from Kierkegaard. He demonstrated, as no one has better done, the humor of dealing with faith in philosophical (i.e., in objective) terms.<sup>2</sup>

### III

Is a Christian philosophy of religion possible? If it is not possible to study the philosophy of religion in general, we may next ask whether it is possible to have a *Christian* philosophy of religion.

Once again the answer must be no. It must be negative in the sense that there can be no such thing as *the* Christian philosophy of religion, for there is no one philosophy that can be termed "Christian". Not only do we deny that there can be one philosophy which, so to speak, is more Christian than another, but also we doubt that there can be any philosophy which is specifically Christian. Christianity is not a philosophy, it is a specific case of a religion. Thus it is correct to speak of the Christian religion; but to qualify "philosophy" with the adjective "Christian" is to put two incompatible terms together. This is because there is nothing in philosophy as such to which the term Christian would apply. There are Christian philosophers, it is true, just as there are Christian lawyers and Christian farmers and Christian politicians — or even Christian executioners. But just as the manner in which a man goes about the business of practising law or of tilling the soil is not affected, except incidentally, by his faith, so it is with philosophy. In other words, there are good lawyers and bad, smart lawyers and stupid: and when we use these terms we mean something by them; but when we say that a man is a Christian lawyer we do not mean to say that there is a type of law which is specifically Christian and that he is a man who practices it — unless, perhaps, we are referring to one who interprets canon law. We may say that there is such a thing as law and that some Christians practice it, but not that there is such a thing as Christian law. And we should say this also of philosophy.

We say, then, that it is not meaningful to speak in terms of a Christian philosophy of religion.

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard, S., *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton, 1944, pp. 171, 173, 193, 205.

## IV

May we say, then, that there is a philosophy of the Christian religion? It would seem that if we are to be consistent with our earlier statements concerning the concreteness of religion, we should have to affirm that a philosophy of the Christian religion is possible. But in this instance we are faced with the challenge of modern theologians who assert that there is a drastic distinction to be made between the Christian faith and the Christian religion, and that the latter is like all other religions while the former is a distinctive fact of history. And here I should be inclined to agree with these theologians, for when they differentiate between the central affirmations of the faith and those secondary affirmations which can be developed from that faith, they make a distinction which is necessary and valid. Here they are distinguishing between special and general revelation, between kerygmatic and natural theology. The Christian religion, as distinguished from the Christian Gospel, is in a sense a by-product of the faith of the Christian Church, and one which differs from other religions less than we might like to suppose.

I differ with these theologians, however, if they suppose that Christianity is alone in having this distinction; for I should imagine that the same distinction is to be drawn between the faith of the Muslim and the religion of Islam, or between the faith of a Hindu and the religions of Hinduism, or for that matter between the very personal faith of an aborigine and the religion of fetishism. In each case I believe, a person holds to his faith — whatever it may be — for no other reason than that he believes that he cannot do otherwise. He believes that his faith has been given him through some form of supernatural revelation, and he accepts it on what he believes to be divine authority.

It would seem, then, that a philosophy of religion is not possible. There are no grounds for speaking about the philosophy of religion in general, because religion in general is a figment of the imagination of some philosophers. A Christian philosophy of religion is equally implausible, because the term "Christian" does not properly qualify any philosophy. And a philosophy of the Christian religion seems to be an impossibility in the sense that Christianity is essentially a faith and not a religion.

What is left? What is the justification in perpetuating a course on the philosophy of religion within the curriculum of a theological seminary?

## V

In spite of the fact that we might logically be able to demonstrate that a philosophy of religion is really talking about nothing at all, we cannot get around the fact that everyone seems to have a philosophy of religion.

I would say that philosophy may be defined as the way a man reads his experience, the way in which he interprets his world (taking world to mean human existence and not simply the natural cosmos). Hutchison writes, "Philosophy is man's conception of reality as a whole; it is the picture he forms of the 'scheme' of things entire."<sup>1</sup> A philosophy of religion, I would then assert, is the way a man reads his religious experience or the lack thereof. Theoretically a philosophy of religion may not be possible, but in reality all that we say about religion in general, and about such problems as Tillich identifies as questions of ultimate concern, is based upon an implicit philosophy of religion which it becomes our task to make explicit.

In saying this I do not mean to assert that every man is religious, for I think that such a statement is obviously false. There are people who are indifferent to religious questions, and there are those who are strongly negative; it might be possible to say that the atheist is religious in his atheism, but we could make no such claim for the man who doesn't care one way or the other. Nonetheless, as William James has shown,<sup>1</sup> each will have a "philosophy of religion," a basic attitude toward the whole question of faith which will color his thinking and determine to a large extent the kind of experience he recognizes (i.e. a *gestalt* of experience) and the kinds of values which are meaningful to him. Even the man who claims indifference toward religious faith expresses in his attitude a philosophy of religion — namely, the view that religious problems are no concern of his at all.

In this rather vague sense, therefore, a philosophy of religion is not only possible but inevitable. One's world view must be such that the possibility of religious convictions will either be included or excluded, and if such a possibility is admitted, the type of conviction will in some sense be determined before any convictions have been consciously formulated.

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<sup>1</sup> Hutchison, J. A.: *Faith, Reason, and Existence*, N. Y. 1956, p. 8.

<sup>1</sup> James, W., *The Will to Believe*, N. Y., 1956, p. 11.



It is in this sense that William Zurdeeg speaks of "convictor systems" in his *Analytical Philosophy of Religion*. According to his approach, one way in which the philosophy of religion is to be interpreted is as a discipline within philosophy which enables us to determine the basic presuppositions that underlie the religious systems of various types.

There is a further step which is possible according to Zurdeeg's way of thinking. It is the task of philosophy of religion to analyze the ways in which words and symbols are used in particular religious structures so that we may determine what it is we are asserting when we make religious statements.<sup>1</sup>

All this is in the field of epistemology. It has to do with the possibility of religious knowledge, and it asserts by implication that we are limited in what we can know to be true and cannot ask ultimate questions about our world and God. The possibility of going beyond epistemology to metaphysical assertions — in other words, the possibility of getting behind a description of the contents of our faith to any assertion about the correspondence of our faith to reality itself, is not granted.

There has been a recent attempt of some merit to get around this epistemological difficulty by restating the problem along lines suggested by John Oman earlier in this century. John Hick,<sup>2</sup> to whom reference has already been made, suggests that we have mistakenly associated knowledge with vision and have come to believe that there is a type of knowledge which is more dependable than faith. Actually, says Hick, there is no type of knowledge which has this kind of clarity, and the only guarantee of any aspect of our experience is psychological certainty. Hick attempts to demonstrate that faith suffers no more serious a handicap in this respect than does any other form of knowledge, and that the knowledge of faith is neither more nor less dependable than the knowledge of sense experience. Going on from this point he shows that there are three levels of our experience: knowledge of our world, moral knowledge, and knowledge of God, and that the latter two carry as much conviction as does the first.

A somewhat similar type of study by Polanyi asserts that all knowledge is personal, that it must be appropriated, and that because it is personal it requires skill. One must become a con-

<sup>1</sup> Cf Zurdeeg, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Hick, *op. cit.*, Ch. I.

noisseur of knowledge, so to speak. Thus scientific data are not in a privileged position, but share the same status as other data of our experience, and according to Polanyi, "we owe our mental existence predominantly to works of art, morality, religious worship, scientific theory and other articulate systems which we accept as our dwelling place and as the soil of our mental development. Objectivism has totally falsified our conception of truth, by exalting what we can know and prove, while covering up with ambiguous utterances all that we know and *cannot* prove, even though the latter knowledge underlies, and must ultimately set its seal to, all that we *can* prove. In trying to restrict ourselves to the few things that are demonstrable, and therefore explicitly dubitable, it has overlooked the a-critical choices which determine the whole being of our minds and has rendered us incapable of acknowledging these vital choices."<sup>1</sup>

From this I conclude that it is possible for the philosopher to make assertions of a more extensive nature than the merely epistemological, and that there is a very definite and respectable role which the so-called philosopher of religion has to play in the theological curriculum. I should like to have it understood, however, that he is not able to develop a "philosophy of religion" in the old sense, but rather that it is his function to develop more of a philosophy of man. He does not deal with religion, but deals rather with man who is religious. He helps the theologian to understand more clearly what, from the side of man's existence, we can say about the nature of man, of man's possibilities, of the boundaries of reason, and of the implications of theological assertions about God, the world, and man. In this I depart from Zurdeeg, for unlike him I do not limit the role of philosophy of religion to an analysis of religious knowledge. I extend this role to include certain affirmations (basically metaphysical) about man who uses religious language. Thus Zurdeeg's theory that the philosophy of religion performs an analytical role is supplemented by the assertion that it can say more than merely what religious language means. In this position I differ from many philosophers as well as theologians who would draw a boundary around philosophy, on the one hand, and theology on the other; so that nowhere are these two disciplines held to be dealing with similar questions. Such thinkers would distinguish sharply between the language of philosophy and the language of the church, to the extent that they would argue that since the two languages are dis-

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<sup>1</sup> Polanyi, Michael: *Personal Knowledge*, Chicago, 1958, p. 286.

tinct, the problems are distinct also.

My own position is something like that of A. B. Gibson, who suggests that the role of philosophy is to perform the critical role of analysis, and then "to face the inevitable problem, which in the life of religion does not arise, but which the philosopher must come to grips with: is the world as it is depicted in the great religious affirmations, or is it not? It is the religious evidence which sets the problem."<sup>1</sup> That such an interpretation is open to serious objection I am willing to admit; but it appears to me to be more promising than does the narrower position of Zurdeeg and the philosophical analysts.

## VI

My starting-point is man. It is the task of the philosopher to declare to the theologian what the possibilities and the limitations of man appear to be as seen from within the human perspective. One sometimes wonders whether there can ever be the possibility for mortal man to escape the limits of this human perspective: existential philosophers suggest that such is not the case, and I am disposed to agree with them. I see no way in which man can get outside himself to the extent that he can achieve a position like that of God — in fact, one might even suggest that those who think this possible are committing in their own way the sin of Adam.

What the philosopher has to say about man is that he is both great and small. He is, as Pascal has put it, the mean between the extremes of the infinitely great and the infinitely small. His greatness lies in his ability to understand this and to transcend it by choosing himself from his future, so to speak, by responding to the call that comes to him from that which does not yet exist. And his weakness consists in the fact that he is always limited to the interior dimensions of the tiny capsule of time and space which he can never in this life escape.

It is the merit of contemporary existential philosophies to remind the theologian of the nature of the man whom he addresses: to recall to the theologian the fact that man is a frail reed, that he is inevitably subject to the anxiety of death, guilt, and emptiness; and yet that he is *man*, the one who can take responsibility for his anxiety and because of his concern create a world which is peculiarly his own. In the depth of its seeming pessimism this philosophy has the

<sup>1</sup> Gibson, A. B., *op. cit.*, p. 48.

courage to make moral requirements of man which, because of their stringency, reveal the amazing possibilities open to man in any kind of existence.

The contemporary philosopher also, astonishingly enough, gives support to the theologian's scepticism about human reason. If analytical philosophy had made no contribution beyond this, it would have justified its appearance at this stage of the history of ideas. Philosophy has increased the possibility of our achieving a meaningful faith by undercutting that kind of rationalism which had passed as a substitute for faith. Both the analytical philosopher and the existentialist agree that we are mistaken when we attempt to prove the existence of God. The existence of God cannot be proved because existence is not a predicate, says the logician; the existence of God cannot be proved because existence is a concept that does not apply to God, says the existentialist. Thus from the side of philosophy we are faced with the contemporary affirmation that God is not a part of our world, and that if we are to seek Him (to many philosophers, of course, the question of God no longer even arises), we cannot discover Him in a syllogism, or as the alleged cause of the effects we see in our world of experience, or in a pattern of nature, or in a moral imperative, or even in a religious experience; for God is mystery and is beyond the world of reason, space, and time. Thus we learn not only from theologians, but also from philosophers, that our God is a hidden God, *Deus absconditus*; and we must come to terms with a faith that declares that if we would know God we must cast ourselves into the void of nothingness in order to discover Him. We must share Pascal's dread of the infinite silences of the universe, and must come to understand that God is past all human understanding. We must realize that a syllogism is no substitute for prayer, that God answers prayer but does not reveal Himself as the conclusion of a logical argument.

Contemporary philosophy requires us to take seriously the nature of the world in which we live. It calls upon us to become aware once more of the vastness of our universe and of the difference there must always be between created and Creator. It calls upon us, if we are to be religious, to keep clear the distinction between the natural and the supernatural, between the rational and the mysterious. We are called upon to look for God beyond this world or not at all. "Existence is a category much too inferior to be applied to the greatness of God", writes Frank. "For the greatness of God

infinitely transcends our thought, our will, and even our belief. And it is precisely in this transcendence that God and His existence can be grasped by us.”<sup>1</sup>

When we assert that philosophy cannot give a man faith, but may at least drive him to venture into faith, we are serious about the implications of what we say. We mean that religion is never abstract and general (“religion” is a poor term to use in any case), and that faith requires assent to revelation, submission to authority. We are asserting that a man cannot “have” a religion, but must *be* religious. We are declaring that a man’s religious faith is not a thing he possesses, but that he identifies himself in faith with a particular community, and that one of the marks of the community is the faith which binds its members to one another.

If we refer specifically to the Christian faith we are led to affirm that one who calls himself Christian will be a member of the Church and will have as a part of his faith the belief that the Bible is in some peculiar sense the revealed word of God. This in turn carries implications which the philosopher — who may not necessarily share this faith — can help us to understand. We must see that at the outset we take our stand within the confines of the Christian faith, that we are submitting ourselves to the authority of the Church and its Bible. We have eliminated from the start the possibility of a kind of world religion which makes no such exclusive claims as this, and we shall be unable ultimately to find a significant common denominator with those of faiths other than our own. Furthermore, we have accepted as our standard the subject of the Biblical faith, namely Jesus Christ, by whom we believe ourselves to be judged and in the light of whom we judge all else. This means that we cannot approach other faiths in a wholly objective manner, for our criterion is not the objectivity of philosophical indifference, but rather One who by the nature of things makes such objectivity forever an impossibility.

Furthermore, in taking this stand we recognize that there are others who not only do not accept it, but take as strong a stand for the divine revelation of their faith. And this difference we cannot deny; we can only accept it as a fact which separates us. There is no reason philosophically why they should accept our authority nor we theirs, for from a philosophical point of view neither is more right than the other.

<sup>1</sup> Frank, Erich: *Philosophical Understanding and Religious Truth*, N. Y., 1945, p. 44.



Philosophy here helps us to see the boundaries within which we must operate. We cannot breach these limits to include the other, nor can our limits be breached by him. We are separated one from the other because of our faith.

There is yet another way in which our theological affirmations yield implications which the philosopher can help to determine. The kind of God we worship will determine in many ways the manner in which we face such problems as creation, time, freedom, and suffering. By this I mean, for example, that it is not possible both to believe in the otherness of God and in pantheism — and no amount of appeal to mystery can resolve such contradiction. The philosopher is not able to say whether theism is preferable to pantheism (both are philosophically possible), but he can point out when you choose one you are bound to exclude those features of the other that stem from the differences between them. Thus one is better able to see that our theology entails a rational system whether we like it or not, and that in a very real sense we are limited by the theology which we adopt.

This is evident also in the way in which one viewpoint gives rise to questions which never occur in another system. A philosophical discussion of God's existence is as foreign to the Old Testament approach to experience as is the idea of creation to Greek philosophy. The polytheism of Hinduism is not inconsistent with philosophical monism, while monotheism is. The disjunctive quality of Judeo-Christian-Muslim monotheism appears repellant to the Hindu because of its exclusiveness, while to the Christian the lack of any such principle is equally distasteful.

Just as the sociologist and anthropologist can help us understand why we differ culturally, and thereby enable us to live with one another more amicably, the philosopher may help us to see how our thought-systems can exercise a tyranny (and this is not necessarily bad) which makes exclusiveness in ideas well-nigh inevitable.

The philosopher works within rather narrow limits, of course. Like the systematic theologian he must give heed to history. But also there is a great deal of experience which is not open to his interpretation as it is to the theologian. Philosophy is not competent to deal with the problem of evil, for example, (how could it possibly discover evil in a world which exists within the horizons of philosophy simply — and nothing more?) Furthermore, how could the philosopher ever deal with the problems of creation or redemption or incarnation?

But once again we see today, perhaps, that it is the fact of our knowing our limits which makes it possible for us to stretch beyond ourselves and to accept with courage the risk of atheism or the risk of faith. In either case our choice is not simply an intellectual exercise, but is, rather, an act of total, moral commitment to a responsible existence in a void which is absolute for the atheist, or a void which only our faith in Christ can assure us is penetrated by God's spirit. Philosophy here adds support to the type of theology which so sharply distinguishes between reason and revelation.

## CONCLUSION

Is a philosophy of religion possible? In a sense it is, but not as it was interpreted in former years. The study of the philosophy of religion arose in the time of Hegel, but we have long since left the massive system of his day. Now we conceive the role of the philosopher of religion to be more modest than at one time it was seen to be. His task is for the most part analytical and critical, though as I have suggested, he has a further contribution to make. He must help the man of faith more clearly to understand what he means when he uses the language of religion, and what the implications of the meanings are. He has the further task of describing man as he appears from within the boundaries of the human situation. From this vantage point he can show both the weakness and the possibilities of human creaturehood.

I have affirmed my belief that this is no small contribution, for it challenges us to assent to a real faith or to none at all. It reminds us that man's condition is not that of a god but of a mortal, and that our reason, though majestic, is incapable of penetrating the mysteries of God.

What of the man who finds that his philosophical conclusions conflict with his faith? Then he must choose between them, and in all humility with the utmost of integrity. And it will happen in many cases that men in honesty will have to choose the evidences of a philosophy which they have pursued for themselves rather than a second-hand faith which never has become their own.

Ordinarily, however, we should beware of choosing the evidence of philosophy over that of faith. Few can have the insights of a Socrates, but all can have the faith of a humble soul. There is within us an inherent pride which too often closes the mind to the simple things of faith the more skilled we become in knowledge. Some-

times we accept the brilliance of philosophy in preference to a religious quest that often probes the secret places of our own hearts and confronts us with the mediocrity of *our* own individual, personal existence. And so I would conclude by saying that while I defend the right of the philosopher to analyze religious faith — and intend to pursue that course myself — I find in this no substitute for the meaning which that faith can have only if it be given in response to God's love in Jesus Christ.



# Some Axioms of Church History

FORD LEWIS BATTLES

PHILIP SCHAFF PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY







PROFESSOR BATTLES

This discourse must needs begin with a tribute to three men to whom, among many, I owe an incalculable debt. First, to Matthew Spinka, until last year Waldo Professor of Church History in the Hartford Theological Seminary. To him, in a very real sense, is due my presence here this day. He it was who nurtured me in Church History, helped me to effect the difficult transition from one field of endeavor to another. During our decade of close association, he gave me a

sense of the wholeness of Christian history which I shall try to express — albeit imperfectly — in this lecture. The wideness of his grasp of the different Christian cultures, his insistence that Christian thought be taught in its institutional setting, his demonstration that past history gives meaning to present events, and his appreciation of the artistic side of Christian expression — all these and many other characteristics emphases of his have made their impression upon me. For that decade of close association I am grateful.

The second man to whom my debt is especially large is Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, recently retired as Professor of Social Philosophy at Dartmouth College. Him I first met when he suffered through some of my summer sermons in the Norwich, Vermont, church; this began a firm friendship, renewed each summer, and flowering into a Latin grammar on which we collaborated, in long and fruitful conversations, and, for me, in a vastly enhanced sense of the meaning of history and the calling of the Church historian. My debt to him is evident on every page of this discourse.

The third man to whom I must pay tribute today is one who died a generation before I was born. Hartford knew him briefly as a teacher, from 1868 to 1871. During those years he served as lecturer in Church History, but declined the permanent professorship to

which he was elected, accepting appointment in 1871 as professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. I refer to Philip Schaff, "the father of American Church History." Schaff's Hartford activity came during his years as secretary of the Sabbath Commission, a group formed to turn back the growing tide of secularization of the Lord's Day among the German immigrants to the United States. Schaff was an inveterate world traveller, so his periods of instruction were arranged in visits of 2-3 weeks, totaling 8 weeks a year, "to save time and expense." When in residence at Hartford Schaff lectured once or twice a day. That Philip Schaff was never formally inaugurated as Waldo Professor of Church History was due to a number of reasons. Since the middle of the Civil War period, he had made his home in New York, having left war-torn Gettysburg where the Reformed Seminary which he served was located. As a resident of New York, he became gradually associated with Union Seminary. Secondly, there was disagreement among the Hartford Faculty, the Trustees, and Dr. Schaff over salary and equality of status with the other professors. The result was that he never came into full residence.

Yet his arrival at Hartford began a new era in the teaching of Church History in this Seminary. He was the first real historian on her faculty, and he gave a three-year sequence of lectures spanning the entire history of the Church. But it is not merely because of his brief academic association with Hartford that his name has been given to a chair in this Seminary. Philip Schaff was the first truly ecumenical church historian, a man who labored tirelessly, writing, lecturing, preaching, promoting and executing all sorts of ecumenical enterprises from Biblical translation, commentaries, encyclopedias, histories, to movements such as the Evangelical Alliance. He was the founder of the American Society of Church History. He demonstrated in his own life that a truly world Church can come only through the widest personal friendships and associations with men of other communions and other nationalities.

What more appropriate name, then, than his, to grace a chair of Church History at the Hartford Theological Seminary?

#### SOME AXIOMS OF CHURCH HISTORY

An inaugural lecture is supposed to set forth the why, the what and the how of a man's chosen field of knowledge. Such a purpose

may be served either by a learned discourse restricted to his specialty as but an instance of his ways of thought; or by a systematic, if summary, statement of his personal philosophy covering his whole academic field. What you are to hear today is neither of these. It is far too general to conform to the first pattern, and far too unsystematic to fulfill the requirements of the second. It is rather a series of somewhat disconnected generalizations drawn from the reading and teaching of Church History for a decade — generalizations hopefully described as 'axioms'. If they be such, then they need no proofs. They will merely be stated, then exemplified and slightly elaborated. If these axioms have any value, it will be in lighting up and demonstrating the unity of an otherwise dark and vast and diffuse field, the History of the Christian Church.

The speaker brings to his task large disabilities and limitations. He has read but a fraction of the literature a Church historian professes to know; he has confined himself within the history of the Church from the Second Century to the Reformation, and has offered no illustrations from subsequent periods, although more modern illustrations are just as plentiful. (Actually, in a sense, the first several centuries are a microcosm of the whole.) He has deliberately eschewed here the philosophy of history: the axioms here given are the pedestrian ponderings of a cluttered mind. His past scholarly activity has, by personal choice, been in the time-consuming and self-effacing field of translation, where the possibilities of originality are severely limited but the necessities of self-discipline are paramount.

Every one of the axioms to follow is familiar to generations of students, for here, to borrow a musical analogy are the bare themes of the themes and variations of Church History as taught at Hartford. The axioms here given that deal with language are the fruit of a translator's wrestling, as are some of the insights into the ways of Christian thinkers; others are owed to the three men to whom tribute has already been paid; for the rest, the debt is largely owed to questioning students, best teachers of history.

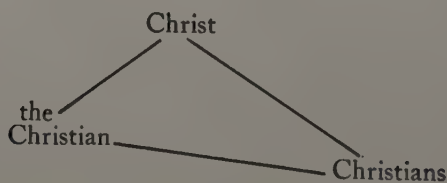
How to begin? There are eight questions to ask, which together subsume the whole of Church History; these are grouped together into a triad:

Who?	}	the <i>substance</i>	}	of Church History		
What?						
Why?	}	the <i>vehicle</i>				
Where?						
How?						
Whence?	}	the <i>direction</i>				
When?						
Whither?						

Within this are framed some thirty axioms, great and small. Here are "notes on readings in the Third Testament," for to speak boldly, what is the history of the Christian Church but the Third Testament? the 'book written within and without'? the book written by the Holy Spirit on the hearts of Christian men and women, the book written by men and women upon the events of times and places, the book of the continuing acts of God in history, the book that alone can illumine Testaments Old and New?

#### LET US THEN TO THE SUBSTANCE OF CHURCH HISTORY

*Who* is Church History? Church History is the story of Christ and the Christian, of Christ and Christians. It is the story of Christ and Irenaeus, but it is also the story of Christ and Irenaeus' presbyters and deacons and simple believers in a church in 2nd century Lyons. It is the story of Christ and Luther, but it is also the story of Christ and the students of Wittenberg, of Christ and the German folk who heard the Word of God from Luther's pulpit and sang the songs from Luther's pen. Church History, like Christian belief itself, is a triangle:





Here then is the *Who* of Church History.

But the *Who* of Church History attests two great paradoxes which are and always have been the subject of all Christian thought: (1) God and man in our Lord Jesus Christ; (2) God's will and man's will in human conduct. No man can ever resolve these truths into rationally-satisfying formulae although all men try; for all men in their freedom seek the secret of freedom, yet in their necessity it eludes them. For the first, the Christological part, Alexandria and Antioch were both right, and both wrong. For the second, the anthropological part, Augustine and Pelagius were both right and both wrong. The debate continues in every generation of thinking Christians. III

And still men try to resolve these two paradoxes, for the restless human mind ever strains, like the human ear, for a perfect cadence. How, then, do these efforts move?

Tell me what you think of man and I will tell you what you think of Christ; tell me what you think of Christ and I will tell you what you think of man. IV

If you drive a wedge between body, soul, spirit, and glorify one at the expense of the rest — you have a wrong-headed doctrine of man, and of Christ. Arius dissolved the mystery of the incarnation by enthroning his own reason as the final arbiter and thus belittled the divine in man and in Christ; Athanasius dethroned his reason in his anxiety to protect the conception of God from shallow rationalism, and thus *tended* to belittle the human in Christ and in man.

We cannot ever have done with the *Who* of Church History, for Christ and the Christians are the substance of all that we shall henceforward say today. Indeed, we can only for purposes of discussion divorce the *Who* from the *What*.

What is the *What* of Church History? It is the Church itself. Here is no monolithic structure, no chain of identical, strongly forged links, no proud and unbroken line of apostles and bishops eternally extending. From the very outset, the Church was a plurality resting upon an inner unity. In this inner unity we must seek the seamlessness of Christ's robe, not in ecclesiastical forms nor even in doctrinal norms. V

Wherein lies the plurality? In the question: what think ye of the Christ? There are as many answers to this question as there are men who experience Christ; but the broad groupings of answers to this question, and their interaction makes the substance of the history of Christian thought. VI

Wherein, then, lies the unity of the Church? In Christ Himself. There can be no other, as the writers of the third Testament even in their disunity unitedly assert.

Christ the God-man; the Church the divine-human society. Here, then, is the *What* of Church History. And *Who* and *What* together constitute the *substance*.

What, then, of the *vehicle*, the *Why*, the *Where*, and the *How* of the Church in history?

The *Why* of the Church, its divinely-ordained purpose is this: Jesus-Christ is the meeting-ground of man and God. The Church is the meeting-ground of the imperfect human society aspiring to God and of the perfect divine society which represents the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose for men. Thus the Church is larger than the Church yet smaller than the Church. The Church of Augustine's North Africa was not confined to Catholics but included even Donatists. Yet not every Catholic or every Donatist was of the Church. In the great Church of that day as in that of ours, human imperfection and divine perfection meet.

*Where* is the Church? The Church is in the world of time and space, of history and geography; but it is also in the mind of man, and its mighty acts of good and, alas, of evil too, take place as much in the fields of memory as on the diptychs of past events. This fact brings us to our next axiom which I owe to Professor Rosenstock-Huessy: History must be experienced.

No man can be a Christian who has not fled with the little band of disciples into Galilee after the resurrection; no man can be a Christian who has not in some sense lived through the persecution of a pagan Diocletian, or the equally heinous blinding of a Christian for orthodoxy's sake at the hands of a Christian Byzantine torturer. We must stand with Augustine in the garden, even as we stand with Christ in Gethsemane. We must stand with Christians of the Fourth Century as they crossed the threshold of the new and hopeful era of Constantine, even as we reap the harvest of that settlement between Church and State in the gathering conflicts over parochial schools in Twentieth Century America. Need we multiply the analogues? The glory and the shame, the deep sin and wonderful grace felt by past Christians must be in our minds as we grope through the labyrinth of our own time, even as they groped through theirs.

This precept, that we must experience history, is not an easy one

to put into practice. How can the housewife, the artisan, or even the humble pastor "experience" history. Church History is long and forbidding in its bulk and complexity. All of us need help. Here, if anywhere, rests the divinely-appointed task of the Christian historian. He is the physician of memory. To men and women nurtured in the narrowness of a particular communion or church, whose memories are unilateral, one-sided, distorted, defective, short, the historian speaks. Resolutely facing his own prejudices and bias, he critically but reverently sifts and resifts the sources of our historical knowledge; these ancient texts he reinterprets to the need of his own generation. And if there be new finds of ancient documents — as praise God there have recently been — he unflinchingly introduces them into the crucible, not counting the cost of what they will do to longheld views. X

This, to be sure, is an idealized portrait of the Christian historian, never fully achieved. But the man whose name this chair of Church History will henceforth bear, Philip Schaff, measured up to the stature of the true historian perhaps better than any other in modern times. His was a passionate concern for the great Church; his interpretation of Church History was prophetic of the coming ecumenical movement; and the ecumenical movement can be firmly laid on no other foundation than a whole history of the Christian Church.

Let us return for a moment to a phrase just mentioned: that the historian is the physician of memory. The broken, crippled, blind memories of us all are bound up, healed, made whole, when we truly come to know the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ as foreshadowed in the Old, as actualized in the New, and as personally and corporately realized in the Third Testament. Every Christian is a historian, and cannot help but be one. XI

The calling of the Christian historian is not confined to those who lecture in seminaries or to those who write books, edit texts, translate documents, or dig in ancient ruins. Every minister is a historian, whether he like it or not. Every minister is, in an intimate pastoral sense, a physician of memory. Augustine did this job effectively but one-sidedly when he reviewed the dossiers of Manichee and Donatist for his Christian people. Gregory the Great did this job when, from the beginning and end of the prophet Ezekiel he preached comfort for barbarian-beleaguered Seventh-Century Rome. Luther was a physician of memory when, in 1520, he reviewed the ancient tyranny of Rome in his three moving tracts: XII

*On the Freedom of the Christian Man, On the Babylonian Captivity, and The Open Letter to the Nobility of the German Nation.* Calvin did it in his Letter to King Francis I of France and also in his letter to Cardinal Sadolet. The list is long. These men reviewed, as pastors, the history concomitant to their own time; and as pastors they healed the memory of their people. Every minister does this when he tries to apply the Gospel to his own time and place. Remember, however, that he must expound not two, but three, testaments.

*Where Church History?* In the field of the world and in the house of man's memory. History is the memory of past men, transmitted; it is also the memory of contemporary men, the memory of experience both direct and vicarious, of many strands drawn skilfully and faithfully and lovingly together.

More difficult is our next question: *How?* How is this Third Testament being written before our eyes? To answer this question we must consider three things: the language of faith, the spokesmen of the faith, and the unfolding of that faith. Our former question, "What think ye of the Christ?" now must be reworded: "How speak ye of the Christ?" The wonderful experience of Christ of countless generations is no private affair, but rather something immensely personal that burns to be shared, to be expressed in words that other men can know. Good news can never be hoarded, stoppered into a bottle; it must ever flow in gladdening, sobering streams to human hearts.

So then, is the mystery of speech at the heart of the Christian religion. Two great analogies bespeak that mystery; the analogy of thought and speech, and the analogy of call and answer. The relation of God, world, and man is subsumed in these two analogies. For God's creative act, which has brought the universe and man to be, no more perfect human analogue is there than that of thinker, thought and speech. The priestly author who penned the first chapter of Genesis, the wise man who wrote the eighth chapter of Proverbs, the men who, in the Septuagint, happily set Logos as the Greek equivalent, he who wrote the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, and Justin Martyr and some of his fellow apologists, and countless others—all these saw in human thought and speech the truest counterpart of God's fashioning of the world and of life. This analogy is the purport of Origen's pioneer essay in Christian theology: *On First Principles*. To mention a contrasting treatise of the same time, it lies behind Tertullian's answer to the Monarchian Praxeas. In

the Second Century the concept of the dynamic, creative, personal Word refuted the bizarre cosmogonic vagaries of the gnostics, and the more orthodox impersonalities of the monarchians. In every generation the creative agency of the Word has fed mystic and theolog alike.

Equally important, however, is the second analogy, that of call and answer. Here, drawn from human speech, is the analogue of God's redemptive act: God calls man; man calls God. Man's anguished cry for deliverance and the divine response are not solely Christian notions: Manichaeism, too, had it, but in hopelessly mythological and ahistorical form. Call and response for the Christian rest in the eternal present of Christ experienced in the believer's heart, but they rest primally in the incarnation, the Word made flesh in history, at the point where eternity and time meet, the eternal moment of all human experience. XIV b.

Man in his anguish calls upon God to deliver him from the prison-house; God calls upon man, all unworthy, to accept a help undeserved, unforeseen; to serve His will but not so as to earn or recompense that help.

Great is the urge to express these inexpressible truths of Christ in human speech. What wonder, then, that the sacredness of human speech itself becomes the bridge of analogy from man to man and from heart to heart, as the good news flies through the realms of history!

In a profound sense, then, theology is preaching, and all Christian History is the history of the Word preached. Yet, glorious as the calling of theologian and preacher may be, a study of history takes away pride in the subtlety and reconditeness of dogmatic statement. For the true vehicle of the evangel across the ages has ever been the common language, simple, unadorned, straightforward, yet deeper than any philosopher's enigmas or esthete's nuances. The learned speech of an Athanasius or a Gregory of Nyssa, the ornate impassioned rhetoric of a John Chrysostom — these rest upon the unashamed and manly everyday speech of Septuagint and Greek New Testament. The supremely yet elusively articulate and sometimes almost poetic prose of an Augustine rests upon the awkward self-conscious Hebraisms and Hellenisms of a primitive Christian Latin. The sturdy sinews of Luther's German Bible stand behind the sophistries of the most consummate German theologian. Christianity is transmitted through the living medium of everyday speech; theo- XV  
XVI  
XVI b.



logical language and ecclesiastical jargon are but a necessary by-product of the primal substance of the faith.

Let us test this axiom against the earliest centuries of Christianity. The first four centuries saw the hammering out of a Hellenized restatement of Christianity, without the loss of its Hebrew foundations; vice versa, of a Christian reconstruction of the terms and categories of Greek philosophical religion. By contrast, the early heresies were efforts to understand the Christ which misread the problems posed by a confluence of cultures and which exaggerated one element at the expense of the rest, e.g., gnosticism. After many false starts and wrong turnings, the Greek mind came to understand the Hebrew God of transcendence and of immanence in terms of a remote, unapproachable, hidden Father, made known in a close, approachable, tangible Son, the Word. That such a solution brought other intellectual problems in its train is not to be denied, but the battle for the Old Testament and for the historical character of the New was won in those early centuries. The most successful of theological constructions of that day were those closest to the simply-expressed profundities of Scripture.

We see, then, that the terms of Christian theology are the rationalization, after the experience of Christ, of that experience; they have no reality apart from Christ. As architecture is frozen music, so the prose of theology is the frozen poetry of faith. This view is, however, no dissolving of the objectivities of the Christian religion into mere ephemeral subjectivities. I cannot divorce 'prevenient grace' or 'predestination' from Paul's or Augustine's or Calvin's own religious experience; only thus can I clearly understand and explain these truths that otherwise fly in the face of logic.

Pastors all, are the true magisters of the Church. Their teaching is compelled by their experience of Christ; it is conformed to the needs of the souls in their charge. Pastor and theologian—we cannot divorce these two. But this truth we have already stated in calling Christian historian and minister 'physician of memory' to their flocks. We need not elaborate it further.

What must come before us at this point is a group of axioms concerned with the spokesmen of the faith, the theologians. In these we shall try to explore the rebirths of Christian language in successive ages.

First we must, in all soberness, confess that pride of intellect is the theologian's great sin. And every theology that speaks to a time

and place must subsequently be shattered, for it soon comes to bind men, not to free them. Such pride in intellectual creation is inevitable: man's creativity is at once an act of humility before God his Creator, and an act of pride, too. Augustine, for example, was humble before God in the anguished quest of the *Confessions*, but self-righteously arrogant before his ancient friends the Manichees, when he wrote against them. With all his warmth of Christian experience, John Calvin showed little charity toward those who disagreed with him, and summarily rejected them from the spiritual élite he was striving to build. Great systems of Christian thought become idols and need smashing. XIX b.

Why do they become idols? Systems of thought, as the first flash of discovery wears off and they become more and more institutionalized, conform remarkably to the externals; but often utterly repudiate the inner truth of that thought. Every great creative mind has *epigonoï*, to whom we owe the preservation and transmission of his thought, but also the blunting of the original aspiration and the cold externalization of his ideas in institutional forms. The words remain but the Word departs. Yet this externalization is a necessary thing, for it is the way in which the saints are made to speak to the churches, and it is the way, too, in which the books of the Third Testament are collected and preserved and transmitted to posterity. XX

Still, the inner meaning wells up again and again. In this respect, how may we regard the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century? Long resistant to reform and increasingly corrupt, the medieval Church was impregnable against mere gentle promptings to put her house in order. In a sense, she had ceased to be a vehicle of salvation, and was but a breeder of fear and oppression. With the reassertion of the inner meaning of the Christian way, there is, and unfortunately must be, an exaggerated repudiation of the institutionalized caricature. The shackles are broken. The dead hand of tradition cannot be gently lifted from a tired shoulder; it must be brusquely pushed off. Luther's intemperate language against churchly institutions and pope was the only way to shock men out of their lethargy, to articulate their rumbling discontent, and to set once more in motion the long-stalled wheels of reform. Theological development proceeds by exaggeration and counter-exaggeration. XXI

Exaggeration is the very food of controversy. And controversy can be either creative or destructive. To take an instance of this truism from early Church History: Origen's incautious insistence XXI b.

upon man's free will was intended to break the shackles of gnostic determinism and to reassert man's moral responsibility; but its exaggerated insights had later to be redressed by Augustine, who struck a new, but exaggerated, balance in favor of God's sovereign power. We have already discussed this point in another connection.

There is another side from which we can view exaggeration of doctrinal statement. In the great debate that is the history of Christian thought, questions are first explicitly asked when exaggerated formulations are made. Until the question is asked, it cannot be answered explicitly. Do not look for an explicit trinitarianism in men like Tertullian or Clement of Alexandria. The ante-Niceans all subordinated Son to Father and gave no definitive dogmatic statement of the Holy Spirit. Their subordinationism was exaggeratedly reformulated in Arius' rationalist notion of a *created* Logos: the question having now been formed on men's lips, it had to be answered. And the answer came from Athanasius and others. Or to take another example, only after Apollinaris' caricature of divine and human in Jesus Christ could men seriously and expressly grapple with the theandric paradox. Do not, then, seek express answers to theological questions which history has not yet discerned clearly enough to ask.

In question and answer have the creeds been hammered out. In their almost embarrassing insistence on certain truths, the creeds point to bye-gone heresies, to wrong views of Christ and His Church, that are still a real possibility in the minds of Christians. When we say: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in His only Son . . ." we are giving the lie to ancient Gnostics and Manichees and to all theologies that, to "solve" the problem of evil, divide the acts of creation and redemption between two deities. A creed, a liturgy, or a work of systematic theology is an archaeological tel, layer upon layer.

This then is the *How* of Church History: language, spokesmen, and unfolding of faith through the centuries. But let us turn from the theological to the ecclesiological. Let us ask the question: "Whence the Church?" What ground has the Church, as an institution, traversed in the centuries leading to our own? More often hostile than friendly ground, but both kinds of ground afford a perilous passage. And in that passage, three great problems have perennially confronted the Church: (1) Church and State, (2) Church and Culture, (3) Church and Herself. The historic theme

of Church and State discloses a paradox of mutual dependence and mutual antipathy. The medieval German emperors could not exist without a Church to provide literate administrators and to keep their subjects docile and faithful to a spiritually-sanctioned political power; the medieval papacy could not exist without the military support of the German emperors, nor without their sporadic but intense reforming zeal. Yet empire and papacy, for all their need of one another, came to blows over investiture, in effect the question of who holds the superior power. This conflict became the grave of both these medieval institutions. And this is but one example of many: throughout her history this has been for the Church an unsolved and insoluble problem. Yet its very insolubility contributes to the infinite richness and variety of human life and institutions, and prevents permanent stagnation of the spirit. To sum up this point, religion is the cement that binds the state together: Church and State can never be separated; yet they can never be put peacefully and permanently together.

XXV b.

Like the problem of Church and State, the relationship of the Church to the culture in which she finds herself is a piece of never-finished business in Church History. In the course of her history, the Church has faced hostility, diversity, and secularization of cultures. The Christian apologists pled for a hearing for their upstart faith before proud and long-established religious and intellectual traditions. The divergent Christian cultures of Copt, Syrian, Arab, Armenian, Greek, Roman proudly and stubbornly clung to their peculiar traits even in the face of an Islam victorious over their disunity. To the positive side of this Christian diversity we shall return at the end of our discourse. And in these post-Christian days of ours, the Church struggles for a hearing in a culture as hostile as that she met at the beginning, a culture however that, unlike the ancient Graeco-Roman one, is secular. Here, too, it seems to the historian that God intends no easy, lasting solution: the Church is in a culture, sometimes profoundly influences it, but must never be swallowed up by it.

The third problem of the Church, if it may be isolated, for discussion's sake, from the other two, is an inward one: the Church in debate with herself. It is the problem of inner discipline, marked by the heartbreaking search for unity of belief and practice. We have already seen something of the wellsprings of Christian thought and of the contours of its stream-bed through the centuries. The Church



seeks to keep this impetuous flood within her banks, but her strongest dykes sometimes fail. At the same time, one sees the main stream carrying sturdy but less than Christian doctrines, currents that repeatedly are impeded by rocks that deflect a part of their flow out of the main channel into side eddies that never fully rejoin the main stream. How are we to put this picture into literal language? Some doctrines albeit less than Christian are transmittable from generation to generation; others cannot by themselves be transmitted, but must be born anew out of each new generation's reaction to the transmitted doctrine. Eucharistic doctrine, for example, is most virilely transmitted in physical terms, even transubstantiation. The more spiritual but subtly expressed eucharistic teaching, such as that of an Augustine or a Calvin, must be again and again rediscovered in Christian experience. To take another instance, a theology of works flows very efficiently in the stream of the Church's faith, but a theology of grace must be stumbled upon ever afresh by Christians throwing off the weight of works-righteousness, even as did, Paul, Augustine, or Calvin.

The search for unity of practice, of worship, or piety, too, goes on throughout Christian history, but in ecumenically-conscious times like our own, the depth of the problem is more intensely realized. The history of the Church is full of brave experiments in Christian living, but the medieval monastic movement and the Churches born of the Sixteenth Century Reformation and of subsequent epochs teach us the lesson that a single group is capable of about one generation of vigorous Christian life; a whole movement can last at best a century—then they are ready for reform.

In the inner life of the Church different aspects change at different rates, however. Most resistant of all to change is the liturgy, the worship of the church, as the slow acceptance of Latin in place of Greek in the worship of the Western Church illustrates; and when, by drastic efforts at reform, liturgy is forcibly altered, it swings inevitably even if slowly back from rash and sweeping changes. We are still in the back-swing from certain changes in liturgy that took place in the Reformation time.

Thus, in the several aspects of her inner life, the Church is at one time or another in tension with herself. Here, too, is no easy subsidence into uniformity. We must be satisfied, then, with a unity other than that of form and practice.

After the question *Whence*, which we have but lightly sketched,



we must speak a word or two in answer to the *When* of Church History. This we have actually replied to already, and need only reiterate that Church History is the Third Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ. Scripturally, all history divides into three ages. In this, (1) ancient heretics and defenders of the orthodox faith alike agreed: the age of the Father extends from the creation to the incarnation, the age of the Son coincides with the time of the incarnation, the age of the Holy Spirit, the history of the Church, extends from Christ's ascension to His return in judgment. These three ages correspond to the three testaments of the Word of God. And for the man of keen historical vision the episodes within each of these ages foreshadow, explain, interpret one another. In the deepest sense, then, the periods of history are God-ordained but man-experienced. The *when* in which we live is both a temporal and an eternal when. XXIX

We come now to the final and most difficult question of all, the question that asks the ultimate end of all this diversity and change and paradox which we have been briefly wrestling with today. Whither? Whither the Church of Christ? Whither the Christian religion? Such a question can be answered only in part from the evidence of history; it must chiefly be answered by an affirmation of faith.

The fullness of God's revelation in Christ can never be grasped XXX fully until every nation has brought its distinctive insights to the common altar. Herein lies the positive meaning of the bewildering diversity of Christian cultures and languages. It is to the vision of the ancient Hebrew prophet that we must inevitably turn, a vision vastly enhanced by ages of Christian history:

And it shall come to pass in the last days  
that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be firmly established  
on the top of the mountains,  
and it shall be exalted above the hills;  
And unto it shall people flow.  
And many nations shall come, and say,  
Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
And to the house of Jacob;  
That he may teach us his ways, and we may walk in his paths;  
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,  
and the word of the Lord out of Jerusalem.

(MICAH 4:1-2)

#### A BRIEF NOTE ON SOURCES

In lieu of elaborate footnotes, which would defeat the purpose of this paper, I indicate here in slightly more detail than in the Prologue the genesis of the 'axioms'. Axioms VIII, IX, X, XIII, and XXIX are owed to Professor Rosenstock-Huessy, whose provocative works demand our serious attention. I refer English-speaking readers interested in the notion of 'experiencing history' to his *Out of Revolution*, New York; William Morrow, 1938. Axioms V and XIX were suggested by discussions at the First International Consultation of Church Historians at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Switzerland in the Fall of 1956. The remaining axioms are the fruit of teaching and translating and wrestling with Fathers, Schoolmen, and Reformers.